

# Freezing Poultry for Home Use

Michael A. Davis\*

**W**ith the rising costs of energy and food, many families buy foods such as poultry in large quantities and freeze the products for later use. Freezing is an easy way to stretch a family's food budget. Purchasing fresh poultry in large packages and freezing it in quantities suitable for individual meals reduces the time spent shopping and preparing meals.

Properly packaged, frozen poultry products kept at 0 degrees F should be good for up to 12 months. Poultry stored at 10 degrees F will remain in good condition for 6 months, and poultry kept at 20 degrees F will be good for 3 months.

The guidelines in this publication will help you freeze all types of poultry, including chicken, turkey, duck, pheasant, quail and guinea.

## Before you begin

Be sure to use a ready-to-cook poultry product to ensure cleanliness and make preparation easier. Ready-to-cook poultry has had all of the following removed: feathers, viscera, blood, feet and head. It has been washed and often has been treated with an antimicrobial solution. The bird also has been chilled to lower the carcass temperature to below 40 degrees F.

It is important to follow basic food safety rules.

- Start by washing your hands, the cutting surface, and all utensils with hot, soapy water.
- As you work, keep the cutting surface and utensils clean.
- Work quickly and place the poultry in the freezer as quickly as possible.
- Do not let raw poultry juices contaminate ready-to-eat foods.

Answering the following questions will help you decide the type of packaging to use and the number of pieces to put in each package.

- What is the best package size for your family on regular occasions?
- What is the best package size for special occasions?
- What packageshape will fit conveniently in the freezer?
- How many birds should be cut up and how many should be left whole?
- Should some packages contain only one type of part, such as breasts, thighs, wings or drumsticks?

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\*Assistant Professor and Extension Poultry Specialist, The Texas A&M University System.





## Equipment you need

To freeze whole birds you will need

- a thermometer to determine the freezer temperature. (If your freezer is controlled by a thermostat, set it at -20 degrees F if possible. The temperature should not be warmer than 0 degrees F.)
- plenty of clean, flowing water for washing the bird(s) before packaging.
- moisture-proof and vapor-proof packaging material or containers.
- an acrylic cutting board or other clean cutting surface.

To freeze cut-up, halved, quartered or precooked poultry, you will also need

- a sharp butcher knife and/or boning knife.
- a sharpening stone, file or other sharpening tool.
- sufficient work space and containers for holding the poultry parts.
- cleaning supplies for keeping the work area and equipment sanitary. (To make your own sanitizing solution, mix 1 tablespoon of household bleach in a quart of water.)

## Packaging materials

It is important to use airtight packaging when freezing poultry. Airtight packaging prevents dehydration and freezer burn. It also helps prevent fat rancidity, oxidation, spoilage, and the growth of disease-causing bacteria.

Shrink packages, like the bags in which frozen turkeys are packaged, are available in sizes to fit broilers and roasters. If you don't find them at the grocery, try a local meat market. Plastic freezer bags and aluminum foil are also excellent choices. Make sure the aluminum foil is wrapped tightly around the product and that there are no holes. A lightweight paper may be wrapped around the foil to keep it from tearing. Butcher paper that is moisture- and vapor-proof also works well. Tape the ends of the paper so air can't enter the package.

Do not use the plastic bags that come with your purchase of fruits and vegetables because they are not moisture- and vapor-proof.

Plastic containers specifically made for the freezer are available at grocery stores. Containers that are square or rectangular use freezer space most efficiently. When using a plastic container, leave  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch of air space between the product and the lid because the meat will expand as it freezes. Some people like to fill the container with water after placing the meat in it. This forces air out from around the meat during the freezing process. If you add water, be sure to allow enough room in the container for the water to expand as it freezes; otherwise the lid may rupture.

Write the freeze date on each package so you'll know which packages to use first.

## Freezing

Proper freezing preserves the quality of poultry meat for several months, depending on the temperature at which it is stored. The faster meat freezes, the better. Since most homes do not have a quick-freeze unit and since poultry meat freezes slowly in a regular freezer, use these tips to help your poultry freeze faster.

- If you use home-processed poultry, put it in an ice slush bath to chill the carcass to 40 degrees F before placing it in the freezer.
- Place packages in the freezer so that they do not touch.
- Do not overload the freezer with large quantities of food to be frozen at one time.
- Remove as much air from the package as possible. Excess air in the package can lead to freezer burn and fat rancidity.
- Seal all packages with freezer tape. If packages have zipper locks, make sure that they are completely sealed. Make sure all container lids are positioned properly and sealed well.
- Rotate the frozen packages in the freezer periodically.

## Freezing whole birds

Broilers, fryers, roasters or mature hens that are purchased in sealed plastic bags can be placed directly into the freezer and kept for up to 2 months. If you plan to keep the product longer than 2 months, remove it from the package,

wash it thoroughly under cool water, and drain. Then re-package it in a moisture- and vapor-proof material and place it in the freezer. Re-packaging is necessary because most plastic bags in which poultry is sold are not vapor-proof and contain excess air.

Vacuum-packaged products, however, can be placed directly into the freezer.

## Freezing cut-up poultry

Some people prefer to cut up whole birds before freezing the meat. This is an easy way to save money and time, as whole birds usually cost less per pound than poultry parts and you do not have to defrost an entire bird to use just some of it.

After cutting up your chicken, wash the parts thoroughly under cool, running water and allow them to drain. Then separate the parts into convenient servings. Complete these steps as quickly as possible and place the products in the freezer immediately after packaging.

Fresh turkey also can be cut into parts for freezing, but purchase only unbasted turkeys. Turkeys purchased frozen can be thawed, cut up and refrozen if the process is done as quickly as possible.

## Refreezing poultry

Refreezing thawed meats is not usually recommended. However, poultry products react to this procedure better than other meats and usually can be refrozen without much quality loss. Refreezing is safe only if the temperature of the meat has not risen higher than 35 degrees F for more than 2 hours. Use clean equipment and other food safety procedures and do the work as quickly as possible. Do not refreeze the giblets or the neck of a bird.

## Poultry purchased frozen

Properly packaged poultry that is purchased frozen can be placed directly into the freezer. If your freezer temperature is 0 degrees F you can keep the poultry for up to 6 months. However, if your freezer temperature is -20 degrees F you can keep it for up to 12 months.

## Thawing

The time it takes to thaw poultry products will depend on the size of the package and the method used for thawing. The larger the package, the longer it will take to thaw. The recommended procedure is to place the product in a dish in the refrigerator for 1 to 3 days. This allows the meat to thaw slowly so there is less drip loss. It also keeps the meat at the proper temperature to prevent spoilage.

Packages of poultry also can be thawed in a pan of cold water or under a cold water tap if they are properly sealed. NEVER thaw poultry on the kitchen counter. The surface of the meat will become warm before the interior thaws, which allows bacteria to grow on the surface.

Thaw poultry in the package in which it was frozen and check the package often so you will know when the meat has thawed.

## Freezing precooked meals

Many families like to prepare meals ahead of time and place them in the freezer for later use. Most poultry dishes can be frozen if they are thoroughly cooked first. Use a meat thermometer to ensure that the interior of the food has reached a proper temperature. Whole poultry parts should be cooked to an internal temperature of 180 to 185 degrees F. Casseroles and similar dishes should have an internal temperature of at least 165 degrees F.

When freezing cooked poultry meat, separate it from any side dishes before freezing. Never freeze a stuffed turkey or roaster, either cooked or uncooked, as the stuffing ingredients have different properties than the meat and will not freeze in the same way.

After cooking, cool the food quickly to a temperature below 45 degrees F. This stops the cooking process and preserves flavor, color and texture. Cooling the dish is simple; just place the uncovered pan in very cold water or ice. Change the water when necessary to keep it cold. It is unwise to place a hot dish in the refrigerator, as this may make the interior of the refrigerator warm enough for other foods to spoil.





When preparing foods that will be baked after freezing, freeze them in oven-safe containers. Or, put the prepared food in a dish lined with aluminum foil. Freeze the meal, then remove it from the dish, wrap the aluminum foil around it securely and put the package back in the freezer. When you are ready to cook the meal, simply remove the wrap, place the food in a baking dish, and cook.

Sanitation is the key to food safety in the kitchen. While freezing retards the growth of many bacteria, it usually will not kill them. That is why it is important to keep food preparation areas clean. Prevent the cross-contamination of foods by washing your hands and utensils often.

### Timetable for Thawing Turkeys

Pounds	Methods	
	Refrigerator (days)	Cool water (hours)
4 – 8	1 – 1½	3 – 4
8 – 12	1½ – 2	4 – 6
12 – 16	2 – 2½	6 – 7
16 – 20	2½ – 3	7 – 8
20 – 24	3 – 3½	8 – 10

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